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Taiwan -- All the King's Horses and All the King's Men?

1. Only a few years ago the prospects for a smooth transition of power on the mainland of China from Deng Xiaoping to his successor looked uncertain while Taiwan awaited Chiang Ching-Kuo's passing with confidence and optimism. Now the tables have turned. China's September party conference placed Deng's reformers more firmly in control and reduced the chances of old guard military officers playing king maker at his death. Meanwhile, the untimely stroke of Taiwan's Premier Sun and KMT party Chief Y. S. Chiang's indirect involvement in financial shenanigans on the island have thrown the succession to CCK into turmoil and doubt.

2. In retrospect, Premier Sun, as heir apparent, was a crucial element in CCK's succession plans. He had the confidence of the old guard mainlander conservatives and the vision to depend on a younger generation of mainlander technocrats and upstart native Taiwanese to guide Taiwan into the 21st Century. CCK forged just such a coalition when he assumed power from his father, the legendary Chiang Kai-shek, in 1975. The decade of political and economic progress that ensued spoke well of the idea and with CCK's blessing Premier Sun appeared poised to carry on in the same fashion long after CCK had passed from the scene.

3. So, too, was the KMT in good hands headed by the bright and articulate Y. S. Chiang. The President's trouble shooter of many years presided over the modernization and Taiwanization of what had become almost a moribund and irrelevant artifice. He breathed new life into the ruling party by promoting able, young, western educated mainlanders and transfusing the rank and file until about 70 percent of the membership became native Taiwanese. What had begun many years before as a Leninist mechanism of control on the mainland became a modern political party stressing competence and constituent services on Taiwan. He was so successful that it literally took the wind out of the sails of the once vigorous Taiwanese opposition. KMT victories in local elections with mostly native Taiwanese politicians left the opposition Tangwai little to criticize and more of an irritant than a real electoral threat.

4. Premier Sun's incapacitation and Y. S. Chiang's fall from grace changed all that. An older and seemingly tired out CCK reacted to the new situation by surrounding himself with conservative hardliners suspicious of change and the native Taiwanese majority. Old friendships rather than talent apparently counted for more in his choices. The new Premier, Yu Kuo-hua, for example, has proven irrefutably that he cannot be counted on to lead Taiwan out of its economic decline despite his friendship with the President and reputed financial and economic expertise. Others around the President appear no better. They are quick to say yes, but apparently fear to give the "old man" bad news. At the same time, they monopolize access to

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CCK and keep the young reformers at arm's length. Possessed of little vision themselves and loathe to turn to a younger generation for ideas, these men appear bent on leaving Taiwan unprepared for CCK's passing.

5. What had once seemed assured for Taiwan--a smooth transition and continued political and economic progress--is now clouded and uncertain. No new leader of the stature and capability of Premier Sun has emerged and the group influencing events now is more of a hinderance than help to CCK. None of them seem capable of stepping into his shoes and carrying on.

6. CCK set in motion the beginnings of a major social change on the island by reversing the polarization of mainlanders and native Taiwanese that had been a fact of life even before his father retreated to the island in 1949. While not yet complete, the gradual process of evolutionary change bringing mainlander and Taiwanese closer together portends profound consequences by the end of the century.

7. Unfortunately, those advising CCK today are not only out of step with this new reality, but are representative of the very group who in the past most vehemently opposed change. Many of them have counselled repression over reform fearful that they and their kind would have no place in the new Taiwan envisioned by CCK. Moreover, CCK had the advantage of rapid economic progress that allowed for a slow and patient strategy of reform. His successors will not have that luxury. The economic downturn that promises to linger on for sometime is likely to increase the demands for quickening the pace of political reforms. A resort to repressive measures would only make matters worse and heighten the appeal of the more radical opposition.

8. The military's role in politics also appears on the rise. General Hau Pei-tsun, the Chief of Staff, and General Wang Ching-hsu, Director of NSB, appear positioned to play a larger role in the succession than previously expected. Fortunately, both are able men and more enlightened than their civilian counterparts currently ensconced close to the President. In the event of a near term succession crisis, both would have a large say in the outcome. Some even speculate that General Hau might wish to become part of the civilian administration after CCK's death. In any event, both men could prove decisive in choosing the shape and focus of a new government. Although personally very capable, their power comes from a group--the military and security services--most desirous of stability and fearful of change. Each may find it difficult to keep Taiwan moving on the course charted by CCK, Premier Sun and Y. S. Chiang.

9. CCK, to his credit, apparently recognizes that all is not well. Economic disarray and the prospects for opposition gains in the November elections have spurred reports that the President plans to reshuffle his Cabinet and bring in new advisors. His choices and the overall complexion of the government and party apparatus that he puts his confidence in at this crucial stage will go a long way in determining whether his successors will be able to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Will he continue to rely on old trusted civilian lieutenants looking to the past for guidance, or will he turn to a more forward looking group of younger reformers? At this point, unfortunately, it is anybody's guess.

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